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SUBJECT: WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS SPEAK OUT ON TALIBAN AND
CIVILIAN CASUALTIES; WELCOME U.S. NEUTRALITY POLICY

11. (U) SUMMARY. Women parliamentarians discussed with SRAP Holbrooke and CJCS Admiral Mullen their concerns regarding the Shia Family Law (septel), Taliban influence and civilian casualties. They welcomed Holbrooke's statement that the U.S. neither supports nor opposes any candidate, including President Karzai, and will work with GIROA, opposition candidates, the UN and other international supporters of Afghanistan to conduct free and fair elections on a level playing field. The women spoke strongly on civilian casualties, contending that Coalition Forces often relied on poor information, or even misinformation, in moving against suspected insurgents. ADM Mullen assured the MPs the U.S. regretted the deaths of any civilians and was continually seeking ways to improve coordination and avoid such incidents.

Quiet on Election Race

12. (SBU) Pro-government and opposition parliamentarians participated in the roundtable. SRAP Holbrooke explained to the MPs that the USG neither supports nor opposes any candidate, including President Karzai, and will work with the GIROA, opposition candidates, the UN and other international supporters of Afghanistan to conduct free and fair elections on a level playing field. Most of the group demurred from indicating support or opposition to Karzai. However, vocal MPs Nasima Niyazi (Helmand, Pashtun) and Shah Gul Rezai (Ghazni, Hazara) spoke out: Niyazi credited Karzai with "opening our eyes and educating us," while Rezai maintained Karzai's government had failed to follow through in delivering basic services: "they could have done much more, but they did not." After the roundtable, some opposition MPs told us they could not speak freely in front of those MPs with strong ties to Karzai for fear of retribution.

Who are the Taliban?

13. (SBU) Regarding indigenous support for the Taliban, one MP asserted people supported the dominant force in the community, whether government forces or the Taliban. Their posture was driven by fear and a desire for security, adding, "We don't have justice in this country." MP Niyazi echoed this, declaring that five Helmand districts were outside of government control. Poor border security, she observed, allowed Taliban to cross over with impunity and intimidate local communities. Niyazi said the Taliban leadership was Pakistani while many followers were impoverished young Afghans recruited by Taliban leadership through offers of food and money, and sometimes threats against their families. She noted Pakistan militant Baitullah Mehsud had even visited Helmand once. She urged a policy of Coalition Forces (CF) targeting the leadership while GIROA reconciled the low or mid-level Afghan Taliban. MP Rezai protested, saying that talk of reconciliation worried many people - especially women. "How can you tell who is a 'moderate' Taliban? And

what is a 'moderate' Taliban?" Shukria Paikan Ahmadi (Kunduz, Uzbek) said armed Taliban moved about freely in Kunduz, while the military seemed unwilling to confront them, preferring to intimidate civilians.

Civilian Casualties: Damage to Afghan public support for
Coalition Forces

¶4. (SBU) The women agreed that civilian casualties resulting from operations by CF had taken a serious toll on the public's trust in its government and support for CF efforts. A number of MPs contended they saw no coherent CF counterinsurgency strategy in recent years. Too many innocent people had died, either through CF's carelessness or a tendency "to believe information from bad sources." Dr. Galafi Safi (Balkh, Pashtun) was one of many MPs who had a story about a community member who had been targeted by CF, based on informants with a personal or political grudge. MP Shekeba Matin Hashimi (Kandahar, Pashtun) raised an issue that resonated with many of the parliamentarians - the need for CF to conduct operations with attention to and respect for local culture. Even inadvertent insults and injuries could spark a desire for revenge on the behalf of families or even entire communities. ADM Mullen assured the parliamentarians that the U.S. took this issue very seriously and deeply regretted any loss of civilian life. He stressed that the U.S. and ISAF were continually seeking ways to coordinate with Afghan National Security Forces and local authorities to avoid civilian casualties.

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